

VIET-NAM INFORMATION NOTES

OFFICE OF MEDIA SERVICES, BUREAU OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH VIET-NAM

SUMMARY

The vast majority of the people of South Viet-Nam are determined to build their own future under institutions and leaders of their own free choice. In the Declaration of Honolulu on February 8, 1966, the Government of Viet-Nam pledged "to formulate a democratic constitution. . . including an electoral law. . . and to create, on the basis of elections rooted in that constitution, an elected government."

This pledge has been carried out in the remarkably short period of a little more than a year and a half by a nation which has been in the midst of a war of resistance against internal and external aggression.

The people of South Viet-Nam have refused to be deterred from their exercise of "rice-roots democracy" by Viet Cong terrorism and the upheaval of conflict. Whenever the opportunity arises, whether on the local or provincial level, the Vietnamese citizens have turned out en masse to cast their ballots.

Six times in just over 2 years South Viet-Nam has taken major steps toward establishing a government fully responsive to the people:

In May 1965 nationwide elections were held for provincial and municipal councils;

On September 11, 1966, a Constituent Assembly was elected to draft a new constitution;

On April 1, 1967, the new constitution was promulgated;

On September 3, 1967, national elections were held for President and Vice President and the Upper House (or Senate) of the National Assembly as provided by the new constitution;

On October 22, 1967, the Lower House of the new National Assembly was elected;

On October 31, 1967, the new President and Vice President were inaugurated, and the Prime Minister and new Government assumed their full responsibilities under the constitution.

In addition to these national-level developments, elections for local village and hamlet officials have been taking place since April 1967. Viet Cong acts of mining, mortaring, assassination, and attempts to destroy the registration cards of the qualified voters have

failed to keep the South Vietnamese from the ballot boxes. Despite precarious security conditions in many parts of the country, the people of South Viet-Nam remain as resolute in exercising the right of self-determination today as in 1954, when the Geneva agreements gave them the choice of "voting with their feet" between North and South and nearly 1 million people chose to leave the North for South Viet-Nam.

The United States has pledged that the people of South Viet-Nam shall have the right to decide their own political destiny free from external interference and force. Helping the South Vietnamese to defend this right is the principal purpose of the American presence in South Viet-Nam.

U.S. SUPPORT FOR ELECTIONS REAFFIRMED IN FOURTEEN POINTS FOR PEACE

In its "Fourteen Points for Peace in Southeast Asia" (see "The Search for Peace in



GENEVA CONFERENCE 1954. A general view of the opening of the Geneva conference of 1954 shows among the assembled delegates (1) Foreign Minister Georges Bidault of France, (2) Secretary of State John Foster Dulles of the United States, (3) Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden of the United Kingdom, (4) Foreign Minister Chou En Lai of Communist China, and (5) General Nam II of North Korea.



REFUGEES FROM NORTH VIET-NAM. These people were among the more than 1,000 refugee fishermen led by their parish priest from Communist North Viet-Nam in the fall of 1954 into free South Viet-Nam.

"Viet-Nam," Viet-Nam Information Note No. 2, June 1967), the United States has continued to reaffirm its position on the political destiny of Viet-Nam. In point No. 9, the United States declares:

We support free elections in South Viet-Nam to give the South Vietnamese a government of their own choice:

--We support the development of broadly based democratic institutions in South Viet-Nam.

--We do not seek to exclude any segment of the South Vietnamese people from peaceful participation in their country's future.

And in point No. 10, the United States emphasizes:

The question of reunification of Viet-Nam should be determined by the Vietnamese through their own free decision:

--It should not be decided by the use of force.

--We are fully prepared to support the decision of the Vietnamese people.

There are difficulties and complications to be overcome in the achievement of these goals, but as President Johnson said on June 30, 1966: "Political progress cannot wait until the war ends."

REGIONAL, ETHNIC, AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

Viet-Nam is a very complex country. Historically it consisted of three quite distinct regions: Tonkin (now North Viet-Nam); Annam, the central part (Hué and Danang are

traditional centers of what was Annam); and Cochinchina, the south. Each had its own culture, was jealous of its prerogatives, and competed with the others. This regionalism, which was perpetuated by the colonial administration of Indochina, persists. The result is that, even within South Viet-Nam today, there are longstanding rivalries stemming from the historic divisions of the country which make the task of a central government very difficult.

There is also great ethnic variety within the population. In addition to people of Vietnamese stock, there are more than 1 million Chinese; nearly 1 million Montagnards (mountain people); half a million Cambodians; and smaller minority groups including Chams, Malays, Indians, and French.

Religious differences add further complications. The majority of the inhabitants are nominally Buddhist, but are divided into different sects. There is a Catholic minority as well as religious sects such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, which at various times have exercised substantial temporal as well as religious power over their fellows, and have had their own troops and local governments in certain areas.

Finally, for almost 100 years prior to 1954, Viet-Nam was under colonial rule and developed no real tradition or experience in practicing democracy.

Thus, any South Vietnamese central government would face serious problems in establishing an effective and democratic regime, even without the enormous burden of armed aggression from North Viet-Nam.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL VIET-NAM

It is not an easy thing for the Vietnamese people to become active supporters of the government when they have been intimidated and terrorized by the Viet Cong for years and when no government in the recent past has been able adequately to protect them and enhance their well-being. As the Vietnamese Government prepared plans for its current pacification effort, officials became increasingly aware that revitalization of local self-government was indispensable in the task of winning the population over to the national cause. That attitude has been markedly reflected in government actions during recent years.

Under the unitary form of government inherited from the French, the division of the country into provinces and districts was the prerogative of the central government, specifically the Ministry of the Interior. Provinces thus could be created and dissolved at will, and provincial officials were appointed directly. As a first move to cause this echelon of government to be more responsive to the needs and desires of the people, consultative councils of elected members were

established. (A second step, the direct election of the province chiefs by the provincial electorate, is provided for in the new constitution promulgated April 1; but this may be postponed during the first presidential term because of the present emergency.)

The villages and hamlets of rural South Viet-Nam are the two echelons of government closest to the population. In the last decade the traditional autonomy of the villages and their component hamlets has been eroded by two factors: Viet Cong politico-military activity, and centralization of local government affairs by the Saigon authorities. Local elections had been suspended for 12 years because of insecure conditions, and centrally appointed officials had come to exercise more and more direct authority at local levels.

PROVINCE-LEVEL ELECTIONS, 1965

On May 30, 1965, elections were conducted throughout South Viet-Nam for provincial and municipal councils. Candidates for the councils had to meet certain qualifications: they had to be citizens at least 25 years of age, and either to have been born in the provinces or cities concerned or to have resided there at least 6 months prior to filing their candidacies. Certain appointed officials in office, such as province chiefs, mayors, judges, and commissioned and noncommissioned officers of the Armed Forces on active duty, were prohibited from running.

Throughout South Viet-Nam, 1,000 candidates contested 471 seats. Of the 4.7 million registered voters, 3.5 million, or 74 percent, cast ballots. To make voting easier for those who read with difficulty, each candidate chose an identifying symbol to emblazon on his campaign posters—for example, a plow, a water buffalo, a lamp, a flower, or a conical hat. Several groups and organizations were particularly successful in placing their candidates. The major organized labor confederation elected 13 of its 16 candidates. In the central provinces, candidates associated with Buddhist organizations made strong showings. In several southern provinces the Hoa Hao predominated. No significant irregularities were observed; indeed some foreign press observers termed the elections the most honest Viet-Nam had ever had up to that time.

Since their election, these councils have played increasingly significant roles in providing advice to the Government's provincial administrators.

DEMOCRATIC PROCESS STRENGTHENED AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

At the Manila Conference, October 1966, the South Vietnamese Government representatives pledged to strengthen further the democratic process at the local level by holding

village and hamlet elections early in 1967.

In keeping with that pledge, the Government issued a series of decrees in December 1966 completely revising the structure and functioning of local government. These decrees provide for popularly elected village councils, which choose the village chiefs from among their memberships, and for popularly elected hamlet chiefs, with elected deputy chiefs in hamlets having more than 3,000 residents. Moreover, village and hamlet officials enjoy generally unrestricted exercise of a wide range of new powers. For example, in October 1967 the financial responsibilities of local governments were substantially increased when the Saigon authorities completely decentralized the levying, collection, and spending of land taxes.

In what was called "the initial phase," elections for village councilors and for hamlet chiefs were held during April and May 1967 wherever protection from the Viet Cong could be provided for the candidates, the voters, and the subsequently elected officials. At that time, elections took place in 984 of the 2,526 villages in South Viet-Nam, and a total of 78 percent of the 3.2 million registered voters in these villages elected 8,964 councilmen despite Viet Cong terrorism.

Voting participation in the hamlet elections was even higher. Seventy-nine percent of the 2.9 million registered voters in the hamlets elected 4,983 hamlet chiefs and deputies, representing 4,485 hamlets out of a total of 11,250.

As new villages and hamlets are pacified and made secure throughout South Viet-Nam, similar elections are being held. By the end of August 1967 an additional 53 villages and 140 hamlets had elected their own officials. By the end of 1967 almost half of South Viet-Nam's villages and over half of the hamlets



ELECTION DAY IN BINH TAY. Binh Tay voters have their registration cards checked by a Revolutionary Development team member before casting their ballots in the hamlet elections.

are expected to have chosen their local leadership through elections. These villages and hamlets comprise well over a majority of the country's rural population.

BUILDING A NEW CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM

On January 15, 1966, Nguyen Cao Ky, then Prime Minister, announced his government's intention to begin the transition to constitutional, representative government. This was to be completed by the end of 1967.

The preliminary steps included the convening in April 1966 of a National Political Congress representing all non-Communist groupings in South Viet-Nam. On the recommendation of this body, Nguyen Van Thieu, then Chief of State, decreed that within 3 to 5 months free elections would be held for a representative body to draft a constitution. An Election Law Drafting Committee of 32 representatives from the major political groups was assigned the task of preparing the election regulations and procedures. On June 19 the Government decreed that elections would be held in September for 117 deputies to the Constituent Assembly, and that each deputy would represent 50,000 registered voters in his district.

Constituent Assembly Election

Competition for the 117 Assembly seats was vigorous. Campaigns were conducted by 532 candidates, or an average of five candidates per seat. They included professors and teachers, civil servants, members of locally elected councils, doctors, lawyers, military personnel, businessmen, and women.

The Viet Cong waged a vigorous propaganda campaign of intimidation up to election day. Seeing the election as a challenge to their political pretensions, they carried out numerous attacks on lines of communications, blew up trucks carrying voters to polling places, mined bridges, detonated grenades at or near polling places, and directed harassing fire at a number of district headquarters during the election period.

On election day, September 11, 4.3 million voters went to the polls. This figure represented 81 percent of the 5.3 million registered electorate and more than 50 percent of South Viet-Nam's estimated 8.25 million population of voting age. [As a measurement of voter participation, it is interesting to note that in the 1964 U. S. presidential elections, out of an eligible voting population of 113,931,000 only 62 percent (70,642,000) exercised the franchise.]

The Government of South Viet-Nam had invited U.N. Secretary-General U Thant to send observers to witness the elections. U Thant was unable to accept the invitation, but the elections were fully observed and favorably

reported on by the diplomatic corps and the 300-man resident foreign press corps. Parliamentary delegations from Japan and Korea also had praise for the manner in which the elections were conducted.

The South Vietnamese refusal to be intimidated demonstrated the falsity of the Viet Cong claims to control over two-thirds of the population and to be the "sole representative" of the Vietnamese people.

Composition and Activities of Assembly

The deputies of the Constituent Assembly, which first convened on September 27, 1966, were young (average age 41) and were widely representative of all the major non-Communist elements of the Vietnamese body politic. Debates in the Assembly were vigorous, and its deliberations included considerable give-and-take among the deputies themselves and between the Assembly and the Government.

After 170 days of debate and trips by the Drafting Committee to the countryside to obtain local views on desired constitutional provisions, the Assembly on March 18, 1967, unanimously approved a revised draft of the proposed text. On March 19 the Directorate (a 20-member civilian-military committee which was responsible for the daily conduct of affairs) approved the draft constitution and transmitted it to the Armed Forces Council, parent body of the Directorate. The Council approved the constitution on March 27 without change, and Chief of State Thieu promulgated the document on April 1.



HISTORIC OCCASION. Chief of State Nguyen Van Thieu signs the decree which puts the Republic of Viet-Nam's new constitution into effect. Taking part in the April 1967 signing on the steps of Independence Palace in Saigon are: Lt. Gen. Pham Xuan Thieu, Secretary General of the National Leadership Committee; Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, Defense Minister Gen. Cao Van Vien, and National Constituent Assembly speaker Phan Khac Suu (on Thieu's left, partially obscured).

Main Provisions of the Constitution

The form of government ordained in the constitution is a modified presidential system. It calls for a President as Chief of State who designates a Prime Minister and a Cabinet to manage governmental business. In addition, a bicameral National Assembly and an independent judiciary exercise legislative and judicial powers, respectively.

The Assembly can override a Presidential veto of a bill by an absolute majority of the total membership of both houses. It can also recommend Presidential removal of any or all Cabinet ministers, including the Prime Minister, by two-thirds majority of total Assembly membership. Should the President demur, this recommendation is binding if it is subsequently re-adopted by three-quarters of the total membership. The constitution also contains important provisions for the protection of human rights and the advancement of social welfare.

During the crucial interim period between promulgation of the constitution and election of a president both the ruling National Leadership Committee and the Constituent Assembly remained in office. The Assembly, which became the Provisional Legislative Assembly under the constitution, drafted the laws for the national elections.

ELECTIONS FOR A NEW NATIONAL GOVERNMENT

On September 3, 1967, the South Vietnamese people went to the polls in record numbers—this time to elect a President, Vice President, and Upper House of the National Assembly.



VILLAGERS VOTE DESPITE VIET CONG TERRORISM. Huynh Tam, 77-year-old native of Hieu Xuong district of Phu Yen Province in South Viet-Nam, casts his ballot at polling place 19 in Phu Lam hamlet. Mr. Tam was injured when the Viet Cong exploded a bomb at this voting place only a short time earlier. Three people were killed, and 42 wounded in the blast.

Once again, they defied a Viet Cong terror and intimidation campaign to cast their ballots for their new leadership. Some 83 percent, or 4.8 million, of the 5.8 million registered voters actually voted; a half-million more than the year before. They comprised 57 percent of the entire voting-age population—another indication of the wide popular participation in the electoral process and another stunning setback to the Viet Cong's pretension that they represent the people of South Viet-Nam.

The presidential campaign was warmly contested by 11 slates. The candidates included an ex-Prime Minister (and ex-Mayor of Saigon), three members of the Constituent Assembly including its President, and several well-known revolutionary party figures who had participated in the anti-French nationalist struggle. Press censorship was abolished on July 21, and the various candidates' views were freely expressed in the press, on radio and television, and on speaking tours around the country.

The slate of Chief of State Thieu and Prime Minister Ky received 35 percent of the vote. The slate coming in second, headed by lawyer Truong Dinh Dzu, received 17 percent. Other slates split the remainder. A simple plurality was required for election.

A total of 480 candidates (48 lists of 10 persons each), representing all of Viet-Nam's non-Communist groups, vied for the 60 Upper House seats. Voters could cast ballots for up to six lists, and the six lists receiving the most votes nationwide were declared the winners.

Foreign Observers

The September 3 elections drew wide international attention. More than half (24) of the 41 countries to which the Government of South Viet-Nam had extended invitations sent observers to witness the national elections. Among these were Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Laos, Thailand, Republic of China, India, Malaysia, Belgium, Greece, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Morocco, Turkey, and the United States. Secretary-General U Thant declined the invitation to send U.N. observers.

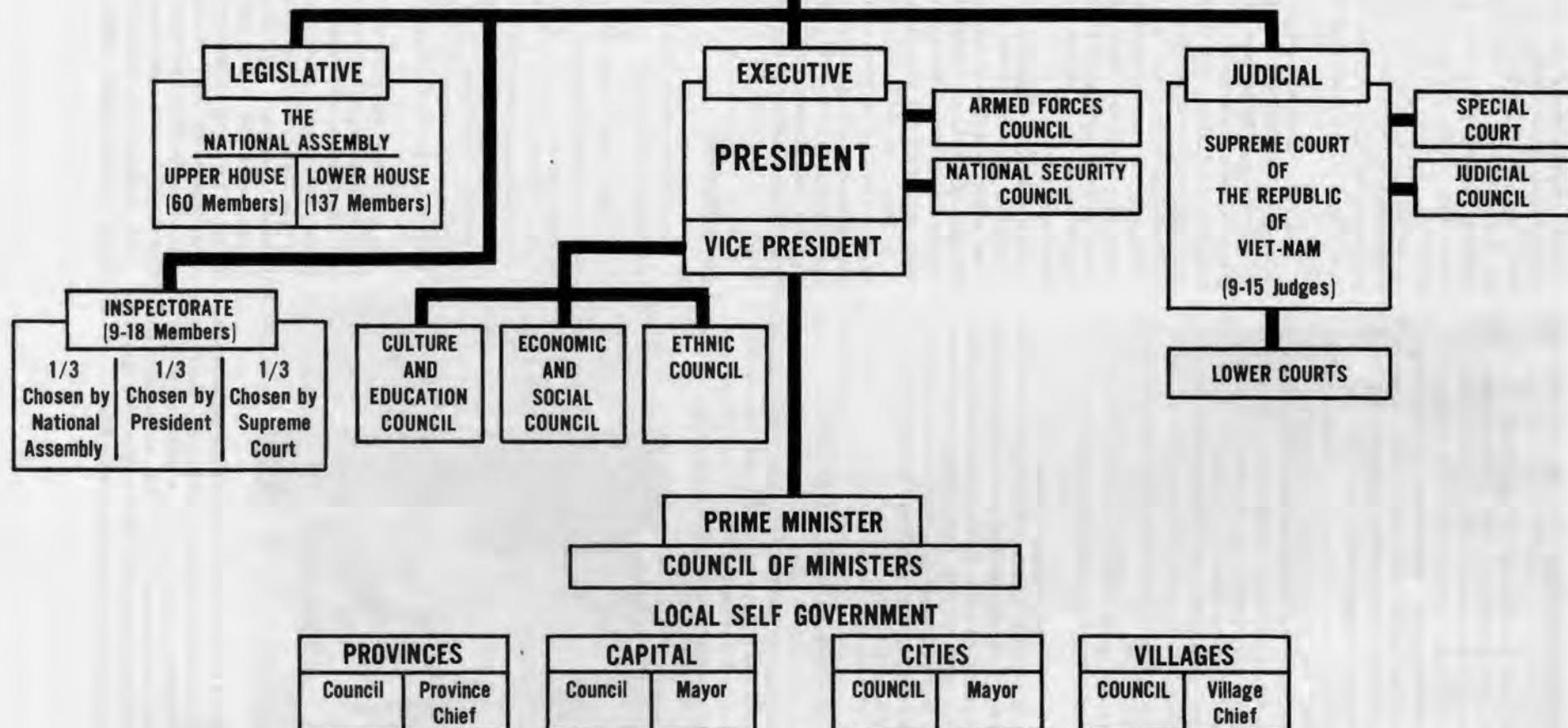
In addition to 116 official observers, more than 600 foreign correspondents, cameramen, and TV crews, representing the world's major news services, and representatives of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, visited all four zones, or Corps Areas, and the principal cities of South Viet-Nam. They had complete freedom to meet the candidates, to talk to the people, and to observe and to discuss the balloting procedures, sometimes at considerable personal risk.

As a result of their firsthand observations many journalists and officials expressed

THE REPUBLIC OF VIET-NAM

THE CONSTITUTION

PROMULGATED APRIL 1, 1967



Note: Councils and Executive Heads are popularly elected (Village Chiefs may be elected by Village Councils from among Council Members)



NEW SENATE MEMBERS AT INAUGURATION. Vice President-elect Nguyen Cao Ky, President-elect Nguyen Van Thieu, and the eldest member of the newly elected Senate, Vo Van Truyen, stand with the 60-member Senate during the playing of the national anthem at Dien Hong Palace.

greater understanding of South Viet-Nam's problems and warm admiration for the courage of the people, some of whom completed their voting even after having been wounded in Viet Cong attacks on polling centers.

The overwhelming consensus of the observers was that the Government of South Viet-Nam had made every attempt to hold an honest election, that voting officials had demonstrated a high level of efficiency, and that the elections themselves were free and fair by any reasonable standards.

The Constituent Assembly validated the results of the presidential election on October 2 in accordance with the electoral law. Final validation of the election of deputies to the Assembly was decided by the respective Houses themselves.

Lower House Elections

On October 22 the Vietnamese people completed the final step in the democratic election of their national-level leadership. Seventy-three percent of the registered voters of South Viet-Nam selected 135 men and two women to represent them in the Lower House of the new National Assembly. The Lower House mem-

bership is widely representative of both national and local political interests, since its members were elected on a local-constituency basis.

The Lower House members are young, the average age being 39. Most deputies have had some experience in government. More than half of the members are either civil servants (29), Constituent Assembly deputies (19), or military officers (30). The remainder are teachers, professional and business men, elected officials of city or provincial councils, farmers, and newsmen. Several ex-student leaders were among the successful candidates.

Most of the members were born in south or central Viet-Nam (59 and 44 respectively); 32 were born in north Viet-Nam. There is representation from all the major religious groups, with about 65 Buddhists, some 35 Catholics, and the remainder split among the various other religious groups: Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Confucianists, and others.

Installation of New Government

The inauguration of President Thieu and Vice President Ky and the appointment of Prime Minister Nguyen Van Loc on October 31, 1967, marked the final step in the return to representative government promised nearly 2 years earlier. The transition from military rule to constitutional democracy without bloodshed and in the midst of a savage conflict constitutes an almost unprecedented achievement in rapid political evolution under uniquely adverse circumstances.

In his inauguration speech President Thieu stated that his national policy would be based on three major elements—building democracy, restoring peace, and reforming society. On November 15 Prime Minister Loc outlined an "Action Program" calling for major governmental reform and for vigorous new policies in the fields of agricultural reform and development, urban improvement, and social welfare.

South Viet-Nam now begins a new phase of its history which is filled with promise and problems—with a government as yet untested, but resolved to continue the democracy-building process.

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VIET-NAM INFORMATION NOTES

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PRESENTLY AVAILABLE ...

1. Basic Data on South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8195) summarizes general information on the land, people, history, government, and economy of the country.
2. The Search for Peace in Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8196) reviews the efforts of individuals, governments, and international bodies to bring about a peaceful solution to the conflict in Viet-Nam. The policy of the Government of North Viet-Nam with regard to a peaceful settlement is included.
3. Communist-Directed Forces in South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8197) seeks to answer such questions as: What is the Viet Cong? Who are its leaders? How is it related to party and government organs of North Viet-Nam? What are the Communists' objectives? Their strengths? Their weaknesses?
4. Free World Assistance for South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8213) describes the scope of the international aid program for the Republic of Viet-Nam. It gives facts and figures about the contributions of 36 participating nations (U.S. aid is not included—a separate Note is to be devoted to that subject).
5. Political Development in South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8231) discusses South Viet-Nam's steady progress toward an elected government and representative institutions at all levels of government.
6. Why We Fight in Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8245) describes the origin of the conflict and the principal reasons for U. S. involvement.
7. Viet-Cong Terror Tactics in South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8259) describes the deliberate campaign of terror by which the Viet-Cong hope to break the resistance of South Viet-Nam.
8. National Reconciliation in South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8260) describes the Chieu-Hoi, or Open Arms, program of the Government of South Viet-Nam.
9. Prisoners of War (Dept. of State pub. 8275) explains the special status of prisoners of war under the Geneva convention, allied treatment of prisoners and efforts to discuss with North Viet-Nam and the Communist National Liberation Front repatriation, exchange, and other matters pertinent to prisoners of war.
10. Legal Basis for U.S. Military Aid to South Viet-Nam (Dept. of State pub. 8285) discusses the well-established points of law and fact which are the legal basis for the U.S. military commitment in South Viet-Nam.

COMING SOON ...

Several other Viet-Nam Information Notes will be available in the near future. Anticipated subjects include "Opinions of Asian Leaders"; "AID in Viet-Nam"; "The Military Struggle"; and "Wars of National Liberation." The Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, on request, will place individuals on its mailing list to receive Selected United States Government Publications—a free, biweekly announcement of new publications, including subsequent numbers of this series.